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ABSTRACT

The earlier composition is introduced in language instruction, the sooner students see it as a means for self-expression. However, beginning students have not learned enough grammar to produce intelligible compositions and intermediate students frequently have difficulty in synthesizing what they have learned. Thus the teacher must try to correct multiform errors without confusing or discouraging enthusiastic authors. In German, a prevalent stumbling block is the integration of the noun and its modifiers. This problem can be reduced by using a reference consolidating independent grammatical elements so they are visible at a glance, a comprehensive table declining definite articles, indefinite articles, attributive adjectives, nouns, "der"-words, "ein"-words, and prepositions. For intermediate students, its usefulness can be enhanced by having students prepare their own. Students of elementary German can be similarly guided in preparing their own tables even though they are not familiar with all of the content. Adherence to the table reduces the variety of errors students are likely to make in grammar, and corrections can be correlated with specific points on the table, making them more easily understood. The table is also useful for teachers in correcting compositions. (MSE)

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A COMPREHENSIVE DECLENSION TABLE FOR COMPOSITIONS IN GERMAN

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One of the most valuable devices for developing flexibility and independence in using a foreign language is the composition. The earlier it becomes a regular part of homework assignments, the sooner students grow accustomed to viewing the language as a tool for self-expression. But, useful as this exercise is, it is not without problems for both students and teacher. Beginning students have not yet learned enough grammar to produce intelligible compositions, intermediate students frequently experience difficulty in synthesizing what they have learned, and the teacher must correct multiform errors without confusing or, worse yet, discouraging the enthusiastic authors.

In German, a prevalent stumbling block in the way to an acceptable composition is the integration of the noun and its modifiers. Students of elementary German ususally learn the cases one at a time over a period of several weeks; the corresponding prepositions require still additional learning time; and attributive adjectives--an indispensable part of student compositions--remain a mystery even after they are finally explained about half way through the typical first year text. Unlike verbs, whose usage can be controlled by specifying that compositions be written in a particular tense, nouns and their modifiers do not lend themselves to such restrictions. It would be too confining, for example, to stipulate that students refrain from using the genitive case or the attributive adjective because these elements have not yet been explained to the class. Intermediate students, who have encountered most, if not all, of the basic elements of grammar, generally confuse and erroneously interchange the endings of modifiers, which, after all, are nothing more than nonsense syllables when viewed in isolation. Of course, everyone knows that all the necessary information is in the textbook, and all one has to do is to look it up. But the laboriousness of gleaning the various elements needed to construct a coherent sentence thwarts the students' enthusiasm and creativity. Besides, no matter how many times they consult the appropriate chapters, the information still remains fragmented in the students' minds.

Such problems can be significantly reduced by making available to students a reference device that consolidates interdependent grammatical elements so that they are readily visible at a glance. The comprehensive table that follows (p. 57), with its declension of definite articles, indefinite articles, attributive adjectives, and nouns, along with its listing of "der-words," "ein-words," and prepositions, has served for the past ten years as a useful reference for both elementary and intermediate college German classes (1). The effectiveness of this table depends upon

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the manner of its presentation, which varies in accordance with the level of the students' familiarity with German grammar.

Intermediate students usually recognize at first glance not only the listed elements, but also the convenience of such a memory aid and are eager to obtain a copy of it. The usefulness of this device, however, can be enhanced by having students prepare their own tables. One effective way of doing this proceeds as follows. With the master table hidden from view, the instructor elicits the appropriate information from the class and records it case by case on the chalkboard. During the process of constructing the table, the instructor points out specific patterns characteristic of the interdependent nature of the modifiers. Students observe, for example, that in all but three instances (masculine and neuter nominative, neuter accusative), "ein-words" have the same endings as "der-words." They further note that attributive adjectives also have the same endings as "der-words" when neither a "der-word" nor an "ein-word" with an ending precedes them (an exception is the masculine and neuter genitive). Examining what happens to the attributive adjectives when they are preceded by a "der-word" or an "ein-word" with an ending, students discover that the two (weak) endings "-e" and "-en" follow a definite, easily discernible and memorizable pattern. By contributing to the preparation of the declension table, the intermediate students have benefitted in several ways: they have reviewed previously learned material in a new, comprehensive way; they have discovered interrelated patterns that can be easily memorized and applied; and they have created a convenient reference device to aid them in establishing sound foreign language habits. In addition, repeated analytic viewing and understanding of such synthesized information gradually diminishes the need for the table itself, making composition a welcome challenge rather than an unpleasant chore.

Students of elementary German can be guided in a similar way in the preparation of their own tables. Although these students are unfamiliar with many of the elements included in the table, they are generally well able to grasp this comprehensive information. Outlined on the chalkboard and explained case by case, the new grammatical aspects usually cause no difficulties, especially if they are introduced after the accusative and its prepositions have been discussed and practiced. Familiarity with one case enables students to absorb similar information about the other cases with relative ease. It is a simple matter to explain briefly the meaning of the few new terms on the table (such as "der-words," "ein-words," and attributive adjectives), to translate unfamiliar words, to provide examples and their English equivalents, and to point out patterns and interdependent relationships. The class participates by contributing sentences for a sample compositon, which the instructor records on the chalkboard for students to copy along with the table. Beginning students profit from this classroom activity perhaps even more than students in intermediate classes. Not only does it help them to acquire sound linguistic

COMPREHENSIVE DECLENSION TABLE FOR COMPOSITIONS IN GERMAN

Case/Question	Prepositions		Definite article/ Indefinite article	Attributive adjective	MASCULINE noun	Definite article/ Indefinite article	Attributive adjective	NEUTER noun	Definite article/ Indefinite article	Attributive adjective	FEMININE noun	Definite article/ Indefinite article	Attributive Adjective	PLURAL noun
NOMINATIVE			Der	groBe	Mann	Das	kleine	Kind	Die	schöne	Frau	Die	guten	Leute
Wer?	--		Ein--	groBer	"	Ein--	kleines	"	Eine	schöne	"	Keine	guten	"
Was?				GroBer	"		Kleines	"		Schöne	"		Gute	"
ACCUSATIVE	bis	an	Den	groBen	Mann	Das	kleine	Kind	Die	schöne	Frau	Die	guten	Leute
Wen?	durch	aut	Einen	groBen	"	Ein--	kleines	"	Eine	schöne	"	Keine	guten	"
Was?	für	in		GroBen	"		Kleines	"		Schöne	"		Gute	"
	gegen	vor												
	ohne	hinter												
	um	unter												
	wider	über												
DATIVE	aus	neben	Dem	groBen	Mann	Dem	kleinen	Kind	Der	schönen	Frau	Den	guten	Leuten
Wem?	außer	zwischen	Einem	groBen	"	Einem	kleinen	"	Einer	schönen	"	Keinen	guten	"
Wo?	bei			GroBem	"		Kleine	"		Schöner	"		Guten	"
	mit													
	nach													
	seit													
	von													
	zu													
GENITIVE	(an)statt		Des	groBen	Mannes	Des	kleinen	Kindes	Der	schönen	Frau	Der	guten	Leute
Wessen?	infolge		Eines	groBen	"	Eines	kleinen	"	Einer	schönen	"	Keiner	guten	"
	während			GroBen	"		Kleinen	"		Schöner	"		Guter	"
	wegen			(exception!)			(exception!)							
	trotz													

"Der-words" (other than definite articles): dieser, welcher, jeder, mancher, solcher, jener.

"Ein-words" (other than indefinite articles): kein, mein, dein, sein, ihr, Ihr, unser, euer.

habits, but it also helps them to do so before repeated errors (corrected but not understood) become so ingrained that they are difficult or impossible to eradicate. In addition, becoming accustomed early to a comprehensive rather than fragmentary approach to a foreign language forestalls difficulties in synthesizing subsequent, and frequently more complex, grammatical elements. Finally, anticipating and using the basic aspects of several forthcoming chapters reduces the need for routine drills when those chapters are later studied in detail. The time thus gained can be used for challenging activities designed to develop lingusitic flexibility and independence.

The benefits are not limited to students alone. The specific, condensed information on the table eases the teacher's task of correcting compositions. Both teacher and students have one comprehensive source of information to which they can refer in analyzing errors and explaining corrections. Adherence to the table reduces the variety of errors students are apt to make in that grammatical area alone. Since corrections can be correlated with specific points on the table, students can understand these corrections even before they have studied that particular chapter. And, because some of the time consuming and confusing aspects are removed, students enjoy composition assignments and actually ask that they be given more frequently.

Notes

1 Another article containing this table has also been published by the author in the Directory of Teaching Innovations in Foreign Language, Studies in Higher Education, Arlington, Virginia, 1981.